

Giving stays on the front burner

EMORY THOMAS JR.

Katrina. Rita. Pakistan.

The list of emergency needs lengthens, even as the holidays approach and the usual solicitations for charity support queue up.

Will the impressive response to Katrina et al -- especially on the part of businesses and individuals -- hurt ongoing giving?

Despite a slow fundraising start for Pakistan, history suggests not. During a recent visit with the Business Journal, the United Way's Jon Fine said emergency events tend to spark additional giving, and typically do not interrupt the normal flow of donations.

In this challenging environment, Tile For Less President Phil Stalcup offers an interesting case study in the enduring desire of people and the companies they work for to maintain a constant level of giving.

The tile-store chain leader was fishing with friends on the north fork of the Clearwater River in Idaho when someone asked fishing buddy Bill Clapp about his life's work. The co-founder and CEO of Global Partnerships explained that his organization makes microloans of about \$75 to \$150 each to individuals and enterprises in Central America. Despite the small dollar figures, the impact -- on businesses ranging from pastry making to farming -- can be immense, he explained.

Stalcup was intrigued enough to take a look for himself.

He and his wife booked a trip to El Salvador -- and came away transformed.

"On the way back on the plane I drafted a plan," he said.

The plan involved a fairly aggressive revenue-sharing (or revenue-donation) effort. A small amount of money from the sale of each tile, he reckoned, could be donated to the cause of microlending.

But there was a catch. Stalcup wasn't the only "owner" of the Tile For Less income. Employees share in the profits. And that being the case, Stalcup figured they all should get a chance to determine what to do with the money.

So at the company's annual meeting at the end of 2003, he put the issue to a vote, by silent ballot. Stalcup was prepared for the vote to go either way, but was pleasantly surprised when the thumbs up was unanimous.

The combination of doing good and engendering loyalty through the "good will it spreads with customers" was overwhelmingly convincing, he said.

So far, Tile For Less has funded 419 different microloans, with a goal of making 1,500 by the end of the decade.

None of this appears to have dampened the donations of Stalcup, or anyone else at the company, to causes such as Katrina. He and his wife, Maggie, recently made a special gift to Northwest Medical Teams, as well as one to Katrina victims.

The commitment to higher causes is evident throughout the Business Journal this week. On page 3, you can read about Steve Fleischman's successful effort in bringing Lance Armstrong to Seattle for a prostate-cancer survivors breakfast. On page 24, you can read about the extraordinary but quiet efforts of soda king Peter van Stolk on behalf of women and children in developing countries. On page 27, our SCENE section shows a wide range of giving results.

The list continues to lengthen.

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